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SUBJECT: D'ALEMA TO CODEL WEXLER: MIDDLE EAST NEEDS NEW PUSH

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR RONALD P. SPOGLI, FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Foreign Minister D'Alema told visiting Congressman Wexler that the international community must press Israelis and Palestinians to kick start a new phase in peace negotiations, beginning with a genuine cease-fire and exchange of prisoners. He speculated that NATO could be a possible security guarantor of a Middle East settlement. D'Alema said the international community should prioritize its goals in the Middle East and the result may not always mean more troops on the ground. Asked his views on reaching out to Iran and Syria, the FM felt it would be a mistake to isolate Iran but he had little enthusiasm about contact with Syria. On Turkey, D'Alema reiterated Italy's support for Ankara's EU accession but asked for USG help in pushing Cyprus to be more flexible. Wexler rounded out his visit by meeting leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities, members of the Italian Parliament, and the media. End Summary.

(C) We need to "Move" on the Middle East

¶2. (C) D'Alema kicked off a meeting with Wexler and the Ambassador by underscoring the importance of "moving" at this critical time on an agreement toward Middle East peace. We need direct negotiations among the parties, he said, and it has to begin with agreement of people movement and access. The Palestinian leadership and Israeli government are weak, and the international community must push both sides to the negotiating table because they will not talk to one another voluntarily. D'Alema warned that the gradual nature of previous peace processes is not the answer. We need a completely new approach beginning with a commitment to stop the violence, releasing prisoners, and maintaining a genuine cease-fire.

¶3. (C) D'Alema pointed out that not solving the Palestinian issue only serves to destabilize moderate regimes in the region ("our friends") because fundamentalists use the impasse as an excuse to stoke more violence. The Israeli-Palestinian issue is a central issue for Sunnis in the region -- we cannot engage them on anything without achieving something on the peace issue. Moreover, he underscored that, with 17 million Muslims in Europe, Middle East peace is a serious security issue for Europeans. He

understood that both sides would need to take risks -- in particular Israel, which fears the risk of more terrorist attacks. D'Alema said he told Israeli Foreign Minister Livni that the risk of terror is only short-term. If we do nothing because of the risk, he told her, imagine what could happen in the future -- today we have Hamas, but tomorrow we will have al-Qaida.

¶4. (C) D'Alema advanced several broad ideas on how to kickstart this process. Perhaps, he said, solving the question of Jerusalem could be the key. Perhaps a multinational force could help guarantee security and deter extremists on both sides. D'Alema speculated that NATO could serve in this role or perhaps we could create a Partnership for Peace with Israel and friendly Sunni Arabs in the region. The EU could do its part by offering access to the EU market as an incentive toward regional integration. Wexler questioned the wisdom of NATO involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at his dinner with center-left parliamentary leaders. Former PM and current President of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Lamberto Dini dismissed D'Alema's idea as a trial balloon, saying D'Alema must have been thinking out loud.

¶5. (C) On the mechanics of negotiations, D'Alema said that talks should occur between Abu Mazin, as President of the Palestinian Authority, and the Israelis. There is no real Palestinian "government" because there is no Palestinian state. Only a new government with Hamas as a minority and a genuine commitment to non-violence can win sufficient international credibility to support negotiations.

¶6. (C) In a separate meeting, former Foreign Minister (and Deputy Prime Minister) Gianfranco Fini told Wexler that Italy's political opposition is also seized with the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Fini -- head of the National

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Alliance party, the second largest in opposition -- warned that some European "friends" still believe that Israel's security is its own business. In marked contrast to D'Alema, Fini noted it was important to move forward but warned that Tel Aviv should be careful not to yield too much, given its current political weakness. The Palestinians believe that Israel can be militarily defeated, encouraged by the Lebanon example. Muslim propaganda expertly portrayed Israel's retreat from Lebanon as a defeat. Hamas, for example, is hedging its bets by calling for a cease-fire instead of committing to peace. The Roadmap, Fini said, is the way forward and we needed to re-table the notion of two people, two states.

(C) Reaching out to Iran over Syria

¶7. (C) Responding to Wexler's question about reaching out to regional players, D'Alema expressed little enthusiasm about contact with Syria. Spain and Norway insist we should talk with Damascus, D'Alema acknowledged, but he believed Tehran was a better option. Syria is under a cloud of suspicion, he underscored, and faces an international tribunal into former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri's assassination. Iran, on the other hand, only seeks a political solution to its security guarantees, and we can monitor the nuclear issue through intelligence-sharing.

¶8. (C) Isolating Iran would be a mistake, said D'Alema, because we need Tehran's help in areas such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The international community should do three things to bring Tehran along: guarantee Iran's security needs, underscore that there are no plans for regime change, and deal with Iranian leaders with mutual respect. We can achieve a political solution on Iran but the key for Tehran is recognition and status, which can only come from the U.S. D'Alema concluded that Tehran would be a difficult partner

but in the end holds more potential than Syria.

(U) Assessing our Priorities: Iraq and Afghanistan

¶9. (C) Wexler raised the issue of deepening and renewing international commitment to Afghanistan so that NATO will succeed there. D'Alema responded that the international community must reflect on its priorities and Iraq seemed to be at the top of the list. In Iraq, he said, we have three kinds of violence: al-Qaida terror, a Sunni insurgency, and sectarian religious violence. We need a flexible plan to destroy al-Qaida, negotiate with insurgents, and strengthen multi-ethnic and religious police and Army to fight religious violence. We should consider extending the NATO training mission (NTM-I) to include police services.

¶10. (C) D'Alema continued, saying that Afghanistan is not exclusively a NATO mission and more boots on the ground is not the answer. He pointed out that only a few NATO members were carrying the load in Afghanistan, while the rest sat back. D'Alema stressed that the full international community must get involved, including the UN, other multilateral organizations, and neighboring countries, as well as Iran. Italy will maintain its commitment in Afghanistan but a new political strategy is necessary. D'Alema added that Italy is open to greater flexibility in NATO operations and encouraged greater dialogue on the so-called caveats.

(U) Turkey

¶11. (C) In response to Wexler's appeal for Italy's support for Turkey's EU accession, D'Alema reiterated GOI support but said that the current impasse complicates the process. EU member states now have to consider a "soft" solution given that the Cyprus issue is not yet solved. Certainly, Turkey has to accept free trade and the EU cannot turn a blind eye to Ankara's non-compliance. Perhaps, D'Alema continued, the EU can delay negotiations "selectively," while continuing to negotiate on some issues. Member states will encourage Germany--as the next EU president-- to look for a compromise

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that will provide Ankara with a face-saving solution. With respect to pressing Cyprus, D'Alema said Italy's hands are tied because Cyprus is a fellow EU member. Nevertheless, he said the USG could use its influence to push the issue through the UN as a way to unblock negotiations.

(U) Public Diplomacy

¶12. (U) At a lunch hosted by Rome's Jewish community, Wexler discussed the Prodi government's Middle East agenda. He also received a briefing at the Rome mosque from the Muslim community, including the newly arrived Imam and a representative of the Minister of Interior's Islamic Consulta, on integration issues facing the community. Wexler conducted a roundtable discussion on U.S. foreign policy in the light of recent U.S. congressional elections and performed on-the-record interviews with the AP and the Jerusalem Post. Wexler's interviews ran the same day on Italian radio newscasts--including the public station RAI and the private station RDS--reaching a total of about 3.5 million people. The RDS station, in particular, reached a youth mass market of one million.
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